

How to cope with Seasonal Affective Disorder

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With winter on its way, many unique opportunities make themselves available in the state of Alaska, from sledding and skiing, to watching the Northern Lights and going ice fishing.

Because the days will be getting shorter and colder, some individuals may be at an increased risk for developing the winter blues.

“Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD, is actually just major depression with a seasonal pattern to it,” said Capt. Chad Killpack, 673d Medical Operations Squadron director of psychological health and staff psychologist.

Killpack said SAD typically comes in the months when it’s darker and colder, and when people become less active.

“The biggest trap that people fall into is thinking it’s too cold or too dark to get out and do something,” Killpack said.

The symptoms of SAD are very similar to major depressive disorder, Killpack said. Not everyone with SAD will have the same symptoms.

Some symptoms include anxiety, mood changes, sleeping problems, loss of interest in activities, fatigue, social problems and increased or decreased appetite.

Although SAD does occur mostly in the darker and colder months, there are preventative steps one can take to be better



With the arrival of darker and colder months, many individuals in the area can be susceptible to seasonal affective disorder. To combat SAD, get out, enjoy the great outdoor activities; and contrary to popular belief, the winter sunshine Alaska has to offer. (U.S. Air Force photo/Justin Connaheer)

prepared when winter arrives.

“Prevention-wise, the best thing people can do is plan ahead for certain activities that they’re going to do during the winter,” Killpack said. “Having a plan will

increase the chances you actually go out and do something.”

The Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson Outdoor Adventure Program offers many opportunities to get outdoors and keep busy.

Karl Lavtar, OAP lead guide and supervisor, explained that some of the programs offered are snowmachining, fat-tire bike riding and indoor rock climbing.

The Hillberg Ski Area will also

be open in December – snow and weather dependent – for activities such as skiing, snowboarding and tubing, Lavtar said.

Additionally, having a balanced diet and exercising before winter arrives can help to keep SAD at bay.

When the days get darker earlier, people tend to sleep more than recommended. Keeping a normal sleep schedule is incredibly helpful for avoiding depression, especially during winter, Killpack said.

“People forget that during the winter the body is not absorbing as much sunlight, which could contribute to a vitamin D deficiency,” Killpack said.

Taking advantage of any available hours of sunlight can help many people, Killpack said. With lack of sunlight being one of the contributing factors of SAD, taking oral vitamin D as well as using a happy light can help to lower risk for SAD.

A happy light emits natural-spectrum light to help the body when it’s lacking real sunlight. The JBER Library offers 30-minute doses of happy light exposure sessions for those who wish to read under the spectrum light.

While all of these steps can be taken to reduce the risk of developing SAD, they might not work for everybody, Killpack said. If you feel like SAD is getting the better of you or nothing is working, contact your primary care manager for further assistance.